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ABSTRACT

The findings of a survey on freshmen attitudes in four areas: interest in cultural diversity, racism, ethnocentrism, and cross-cultural beliefs and values, are presented. The 81-item survey was given to 234 students at Virginia Commonwealth University. Results indicated: most freshmen express an interest in learning more about other cultures, and a clear majority assert their willingness to live with a foreign classmate, spend vacations abroad with people of other cultures, and take at least some of their college courses in a foreign country; most freshmen feel Americans do not receive enough information about other world cultures and disagreed with the idea that it is important to teach American values to people in other countries; most freshmen agree in abstract that learning about diverse cultures is an important part of a college education and value cultural diversity in the institution; and most freshmen disagree with the notion that blacks need to conform to American cultural standards and that blacks need to learn to behave the way whites do. The findings indicate that freshmen may be more comfortable dealing with issues of diversity in the abstract than in the concrete, and discussions of attitudes and beliefs are likely to arouse defensiveness. Contains 6 references. (SM)

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Assessing Student Attitudes Towards
Cultural Diversity

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for the Study of Higher Education
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a survey on freshmen attitudes toward cultural diversity. The instrument measures students' attitudes in four areas: interest in cultural diversity, racism, ethnocentrism, and cross-cultural beliefs and values. The results of the survey and their implications are considered within the context of cultural diversity issues in higher education.

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead in Atlanta, Georgia, November 2-5, 1989. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

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Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead • Atlanta, Georgia

Assessing Student Attitudes Towards Cultural Diversity

Learning about diverse cultures is an important part of college education.

People who are racially and culturally different from me make me feel uncomfortable.

Individual racism (prejudice) has declined in America.

When I sense cultural bias, I generally speak up and try to change things.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements? How do you think college freshmen would respond? This article reports on the findings of a cultural diversity survey given to incoming freshmen at a large urban university. The results and their implications for institutional change are considered within the context of cultural diversity issues which are becoming increasingly prominent in higher education today.

Cultural Diversity as Reality

American society has been described as a "nation of immigrants." The values we have attached to our cultural diversity have changed over time, with successive waves of new immigrant populations, and changing economic and political climates. Most recently, attention has focused on recognition of groups whose experiences have differed substantially from those of western and northern Europeans, such as Native Americans, Blacks, and immigrants from Southeast Asian and Latin American countries.

For institutions of higher education, diversity is also a reality. Colleges and universities have undergone major changes in the composition of the student population over the last two decades, with increasing numbers of women, older students, students with disabilities, and students from diverse racial and ethnic groups from the United States and abroad. These trends are expected to continue, and to accelerate, into the next century. Minority group participation in higher education showed substantial gains between 1965 and 1975. Since 1975, the number and proportion of total enrollment of Hispanic and Asian American students has continued to increase at all levels. The absolute number of Black students, however, has remained level or declined slightly, resulting in a decrease in Black students as a proportion of total enrollments in undergraduate and graduate schools. Moreover, "Blacks and Hispanics as a proportion of total enrollments continue to fall short of their presence in the general population, and their participation tends to decline at

each successive level of educational attainment." [2, p. 32] This trend is particularly distressing in light of demographic predictions that, by the early part of the 21st century, one in three people in the United States will be Black, Hispanic, or Asian-American. [4]

Even more distressing are the reports of interracial conflict on college campuses, noted almost weekly in the Chronicle of Higher Education. In recent years, a number of universities have instituted cultural diversity workshops as a mandatory or optional component of freshman orientation programs. Other institutions are considering a requirement that students complete coursework designed to enhance their understanding of cultural diversity. This focus on understanding cultural diversity relates to international forces as well as to intrasocietal concerns. Institutions of higher education are increasingly being called upon to "internationalize" their curricula, to prepare students for life in a world characterized by a shrinking global economy.

Cultural Diversity as Ideology

The issues related to cultural diversity and to strategies for reducing intergroup conflict and enhancing intercultural understanding have been the subject of much controversy, because cultural diversity is more than a reality; it involves ideological beliefs and values. Early American attitudes toward cultural diversity were reflected in an assimilationist ideology which held that immigrants must adopt the language, norms, lifestyles, and values of the dominant group and relinquish their own cultural distinctiveness. This view, also known as Anglo-conformity, has been the prevailing theme throughout most of our history. The "melting pot" perspective, popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, described an ideal society in which diverse groups would amalgamate or fuse, resulting in the emergence of a superior hybrid American culture. This notion lost currency with its failure to materialize. Many groups did not want to give up their cultural identities, and the "melting pot" itself was usually envisioned more as an ethnic stew than a total synthesis of the ethnic and racial groups. Another perspective, cultural pluralism, originated at the turn of the century and regained support in the 1960's and 70's. Cultural pluralism argues for the right of racial and ethnic groups to maintain their cultural distinctiveness and holds that society will be enriched by its diversity. [3, 5]

Assimilationist and cultural pluralist ideologies are still reflected in current debates about the role of education with respect to diversity in society. What constitutes a general education? What knowledge is necessary for "cultural literacy"? To what extent should all students have knowledge of the "common culture" - however that is defined - and the cultures of diverse racial and ethnic groups which comprise American and world societies? These questions have raised a number of issues

related to the Anglo or Eurocentric nature of American education at all levels, the role of ethnic studies in college curricula, the meaning and nature of multiethnic or multicultural education.

Assessing Student Attitudes

Survey Development

During the 1986-87 academic year, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a public urban university enrolling over 20,000 students, embarked on a project to explore multicultural issues as one component of the undergraduate experience. As a first step, a "cultural diversity survey" was developed by a task force of faculty members representing such diverse academic disciplines as psychology, education, urban studies, and information systems. The survey was intended to tap student attitudes in four areas: interest in cultural diversity (e.g., "I would like to mix with students from other races or cultures at this university"), intolerance of other cultures (ethnocentrism) (e.g., "The world would be better if more nations adopted the American way of doing things"), racism (e.g., "Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights"), and cross cultural beliefs and values (e.g., "People are able to understand their own culture better by becoming familiar with other cultures").

Students were asked to respond to each item using a five point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A total "sensitivity" score was calculated by adding up the responses (reversing the scale for negatively-worded items), then dividing by the number of items, to obtain the average response per item. Analyzed in this fashion, the minimum score (lowest sensitivity) was 1; the maximum was 5.

The preliminary survey was pilot tested and revised twice in classes consisting primarily of juniors and seniors in 1987-88. Results from the second pilot were submitted to a principal factors analysis (varimax rotation), to check for the presence of an underlying factor structure. Three meaningful factors emerged from this analysis, corresponding to three of the four a priori item categories.

Administration and Findings

The revised survey, consisting of 81 items, was given to a random sample of freshmen students completing the Entering Student Assessment profile in August, 1988. A total of 234 students completed the survey, and in general they fit the university's freshman population profile. Two-thirds were female; about half were currently in one of the liberal arts disciplines, and most of the rest were in the fine arts (25%) or business (18%). Nearly 80% were white; 40% had a high school GPA of 3.0 or better.

The average total score for all 234 freshmen was 3.52,

somewhat above a "neutral" position. In general, this group considered itself moderately sensitive with respect to multicultural issues: half of all students had scores between 3.2 and 3.85, and more than 87% had scores above 3.0. Statistically significant differences were found, however, according to certain subgroups. Students entering the School of Business scored lower, with a mean of 3.26, than did students from the School of the Arts and the College of Humanities and Sciences. Males scored lower (mean = 3.33) than females (mean = 3.62). And whites scored lower (3.45) than Blacks and other minorities (3.74). There were, however, no significant differences in total score according to high school GPA.

A principal factors analysis was performed on the freshman data. This time, four meaningful factors emerged, each corresponding to the a priori categories as originally designed. Table 1 displays the eigenvalues and internal consistency (Chronbach's alpha) of each factor, plus student responses and factor loadings for representative items.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Interest in cultural diversity. The vast majority of freshmen express an interest in learning more about other cultures, and a clear majority assert their willingness to live with a foreign classmate, to spend vacations abroad with people of other cultures, and to take at least some of their college courses in a foreign country. Most also admit, however, that adaptation to other countries' customs would be difficult for them, and less than half believe that recruitment for diversity should be a university priority, or that college students should be required to participate in activities designed to foster cultural awareness and exchange.

Ethnocentrism. Most freshmen felt that Americans do not receive enough information about other world cultures, and disagreed with the idea that we need to protect American culture from "foreign influences," that we need to teach "American values" to people in other countries, or that the world would be better if more nations adopted the "American way" of doing things. However, while most students rejected the point of view that America is the only "truly free" country, more agreed than disagreed with this statement: "The more I read about the strange things people do in other countries, the more I realize how proud I am to be an American."

Cross-cultural beliefs and values. Most freshmen agree in the abstract that learning about diverse cultures is an important part of a college education and value cultural diversity in the

institution. Most also feel strongly, however, that "American culture" must be protected.

Racism. Most freshmen disagreed with the notion that Blacks need to conform to "American cultural standards," and that Blacks need to learn to behave the way whites do. Most also disagreed with the propositions that Blacks have gotten more breaks economically, that they have had more influence on school desegregation than they ought to have, and that they have gotten "too demanding" in their push for equal rights. But while most students expressed sympathy with Black anger, half felt that the goal of equal opportunity has already been achieved, and only one out of three agreed that insufficient attention has been given to the cultural contributions of Black Americans.

Discussion

Data Quality

How trustworthy are these responses? This survey might simply indicate that freshmen students are sophisticated enough to recognize socially and culturally desirable (or undesirable) attitudes and will respond accordingly, regardless of what their "true" attitudes are. Student responses were very consistent across items ($\alpha = .94$): that is, "high" scorers overall tended to give high ratings to nearly every item. On the other hand, there were some differences in patterns of response: that is, people answered the "racism" items differently from the way they answered the "ethnocentrism" items. We have concluded that while students may have inflated their responses for "social desirability" reasons, they did react in different ways to different types of questions.

Any survey can only scratch the surface of a topic as emotionally-laden as this one. Sometimes less direct measures are far more revealing. During the pilot test of this survey, students in selected classes were asked to give their reactions to particular items, as well as to the survey as a whole. Some of their comments are instructive:

I think people who make up questionnaires like this are proponents of racial discrimination. It's 1988 - it's time to stop.

It is obvious what this questionnaire is trying to find out - are we bigots. The answer is no! We all get along very well in this school, it's surveys like this that divide us.

I think that you are showing your bias by giving us this ridiculous survey. I can definitely tell that this was composed by a Black.

Educational Implications

These results suggest a number of implications for multicultural education. One, certainly, is that freshmen may be more comfortable dealing with issues of diversity in the abstract than in the concrete: the closer to home the issue is, the less secure they are. Another is that discussions of attitudes and beliefs are likely to arouse defensiveness. The challenge for educators is to find constructive ways of probing beyond complacency. To do that we ultimately need to do more than just study attitudes. We also must assess the extent to which the curriculum and overall undergraduate experience provide multicultural opportunities for students which enhance their understanding and appreciation of diversity.

Banks [1] has suggested a useful framework. He identified several phases in the evolutionary development of multicultural education, beginning with the monoethnic courses which were instituted in the mid-1960s in response to student demands for courses related to Black or Chicano history and culture. As more ethnic groups began to demand such courses, multiethnic studies courses were developed; these courses included study of several ethnic groups and were more conceptual and comparative in nature, less political and exclusionary than monoethnic courses. The multiethnic education phase which ensued reflected the awareness of educators that multiethnic studies courses alone were not sufficient for effecting "educational reform and equity", that the "total school" must be viewed as the unit of change, not just teaching materials or strategies. Educational reformers increasingly became interested in the educational problems of cultural groups which are not racial or ethnic in nature, such as women and the handicapped, leading to the phase of multicultural education.

Although many colleges and universities have been involved in some or all of the phases identified by Banks, higher education has not been in the forefront of the multiethnic-multicultural education movement of the last several decades. "Multiethnic education" as a topical index appeared only four times in the Higher Education Abstracts in 1986-87 and six times in 1987-88; most of the articles cited related to student affairs/student activities or teacher education. The majority of the literature indexed in ERIC on the topic of multicultural education is related to teacher education or integration of multicultural content in specific disciplines. It would seem that efforts to effect multicultural education at the university level are fragmented by the organizational structure and culture of the academy, by the division of labor between academic affairs and student affairs in developing the curriculum and co-curriculum, and by the specialization on the academic side by individual disciplines.

The time is ripe for institutions of higher education to assume a leadership role in multicultural education reform. The

changing nature of the college student population, renewed interest in interdisciplinary and collaborative research and teaching, re-examination of the general education content of the undergraduate curriculum, and issues of "cultural literacy" in a rapidly changing society within a global economy all provide fertile soil for the seeds of reform. Moreover, as Takaki [6] indicates, reform efforts have the potential for invigorating the academic enterprise:

The need to open the American mind to a greater cultural diversity will not go away. We can resist it by ignoring the changing ethnic composition of our student bodies and the larger society, or we can realize how it offers colleges and universities a timely and exciting opportunity to revitalize the social sciences and humanities, giving both a new sense of purpose and a more inclusive definition of knowledge. (p. B2)

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Table 1

Factor Structure: Cultural Diversity Survey
With Loadings by Representative Items

	% "agree" or "strongly agree"	Factor Loading
<u>Factor 1 - Interest in</u>		
<u>Cultural Diversity</u> (e.v. = 6.95; alpha = .92)		
I would welcome an opportunity to live with a classmate from another country.	63	.67
I have trouble adapting to people from cultures other than my own.	14	.63
When I meet someone from an unfamiliar culture I usually try to find out more about that culture.	72	.62
I would welcome an opportunity to take some of my college courses in another country.	63	.61
Adapting to the customs and mores of another country would not be a problem for me.	37	.61
<u>Factor 2 - Ethnocentrism</u> (e.v. = 6.81; alpha = .89)		
It is important to protect American culture from foreign influences.	16	.66
The world would be better if more nations adopted the American way of doing things.	14	.63
It is our duty to teach American values to people in other countries.	17	.61
The more I read about strange things people do in other countries, the more I realize how proud I am to be an American.	38	.58
America is the only truly free country in the world.	27	.58

	<u>% "agree" or "strongly agree"</u>	<u>Factor Loading</u>
<u>Factor 3 - Cross-cultural Beliefs and Values</u> (e.v. = 5.84; alpha = .85)		
People are able to understand their own culture better by becoming familiar with other cultures.	76	.73
People of the world express the same basic needs in culturally different ways.	84	.58
Cross-cultural education is important	74	.57
I consider the cultural diversity at our institution as one of its strengths.	66	.48
It is important to preserve and protect American culture and institutions.	73	-.48
<u>Factor 4 - Racism</u> (e.v. = 5.71; alpha = .88)		
Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights.	15	.76
Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve.	10	.68
Too little attention is given to the cultural contributions of Black Americans.	33	.53
Blacks have as equal an opportunity to accomplish their goals as whites.	50	.49
Blacks should conform to the American cultural standards if they want to be accepted.	10	.47